

Wittgenstein and William James

RUSSELL B. GOODMAN

University of New Mexico



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Russell B. Goodman 2002

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface ITC New Baskerville 10/13.5 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Goodman, Russell B.

Wittgenstein and William James / Russell B. Goodman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-81315-8

1. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1889-1951. 2. James, William, 1842-1910. I. Title.

B3376.W564 G66 2002

192-dc21 2001043622

ISBN 0 521 81315 8 hardback

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	1
1 Varieties of Pragmatic Experience	11
2 Wittgenstein and <i>The Varieties of Religious Experience</i>	36
3 Wittgenstein and <i>The Principles of Psychology</i> : An Introduction	60
4 What Is It Like to Be a Human Being?	89
5 Language and Meaning	119
6 Pragmatism Reconsidered	150
<i>Coda</i>	172
<i>Notes</i>	181
<i>Index</i>	207

Varieties of Pragmatic Experience

In the last year of his life, Wittgenstein wrote: “So I am trying to say something that sounds like pragmatism. Here I am being thwarted by a kind of *Weltanschauung*” (OC, 422). What does Wittgenstein mean by “pragmatism” here, and what features of his position make it “sound like pragmatism”? Does Wittgenstein’s position sound to him only or *merely* like pragmatism, without actually *being* pragmatism? What did Wittgenstein find hindering or obstructing him, and in what was he thwarted – the expression of his position, for example, or the appreciation of his position by others? In seeking answers to these questions I begin with a discussion of Wittgenstein’s knowledge of pragmatism, then pass to a discussion of those themes of *On Certainty* to which Wittgenstein may have been referring, using James’s *Pragmatism* as a point of reference. These questions can best be answered, however, through a consideration of Wittgenstein’s longstanding relationship with writings by a founder of pragmatism, William James. This task will occupy the succeeding four chapters, after which we shall then return, in Chapter 6, to the question of Wittgenstein’s relation to pragmatism.

The one explicitly pragmatist work we know Wittgenstein to have read is James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*. In his initial year of study at Cambridge, Wittgenstein sent a postcard to Bertrand Russell, in which he writes: “Whenever I have time I now read James’s *Varieties of*

religious exp[erience]. This book does me a *lot* of good.”¹ Seventeen years later he recommended *Varieties* as a good work of philosophy – without so much as a quibble about its pragmatism – to his undergraduate friend Maurice Drury.² *Varieties of Religious Experience* contains a presentation of Peirce’s pragmatist principle that the significance of a term lies in its “practical consequences” (VRE, 399), and employs pragmatist methods in evaluating the significance of religious experience.³ There is no evidence, however, that it was the pragmatic method employed in *Varieties* that Wittgenstein particularly admired – indeed, the evidence points the other way.

For Wittgenstein entered an environment quite hostile to pragmatism when he first came up to Cambridge in late 1911. His two main teachers and friends – Russell and G. E. Moore – wrote critical reviews of James’s *Pragmatism* soon after it was published.⁴ Wittgenstein would have read Russell’s review, as it was reprinted in his *Philosophical Essays* (1910), a work Wittgenstein discusses in a 1912 letter to Russell.⁵ The only English pragmatist was the Oxford philosopher Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller. Whereas Russell had considerable respect for James both as a man and as a philosopher (he explicitly derives the neutral monism of *The Analysis of Mind* from James’s “radical empiricism”), he had no such respect for Schiller.⁶ “I am in a state of fury,” he wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell,

because Schiller has sent me a book on Formal Logic which he has had the impertinence to write. He neither knows nor respects the subject, and of course writes offensive rot. I am already thinking of all the jokes I will make about the book if I have to review it. I don’t really dislike Schiller. I am the only human being who doesn’t – because though he is a bounder and a vulgarizer of everything he touches, he is alive, adventurous and good-natured. So I don’t feel venomous about him as I do about Bergson.⁷

Russell’s twenty-page review takes on a battery of formidable pragmatist works, including James’s *Pragmatism*, Schiller’s books on “Humanism,” John Dewey’s *Studies in Logical Theory*, and *Essays Philosophical and Psychological in Honor of William James* by faculty at Columbia University. He maintains that pragmatism is genuinely new, despite James’s claim to be providing only a “new name for some old ways of thinking.” Pragmatism, Russell writes, is adapted to the “pre-dominant intellectual temper of our time.”⁸ It embodies skepticism

and evolution, but also “democracy, the increased belief in human power which has come from the progress of mechanical invention, and the Bismarckian belief in force.”⁹ Taking his cue from Schiller’s praise of “the young, the strong, the virile,” Russell comments: “The inventor, the financier, the advertiser, the successful man of action generally, can find in pragmatism an expression of their instinctive view of the world.”¹⁰ These views – however accurate or fair – would hardly have recommended pragmatism to Wittgenstein.

Russell credits Peirce with coining the word “pragmatism” for the idea that the significance of thought lies in the actions to which it leads; but he adds that the idea “remained sterile until it was taken up twenty years later by William James. . . .” This, then, is pragmatism as a theory of meaning or “significance.” It is a theory, Russell charges, that deprives us of anything stable in which to believe, and which in the end is profoundly and irresponsibly skeptical: “The scepticism embodied in pragmatism is that which says ‘Since all beliefs are absurd, we may as well believe what is most convenient.’”¹¹ A pragmatist such as James, Russell continues, holds that in any context, including science, we should believe whatever gives us satisfaction. This would then make psychology the paramount consideration in determining whether a belief is true.¹² (Here we have pragmatism as a theory of truth.) Russell also charges that pragmatists are relativists: “One gathers (perhaps wrongly) from [James’s] instances that a Frenchman ought to believe in Catholicism, an American in the Monroe Doctrine, and an Arab in the Mahdi. . . .”¹³

One of Russell’s bolder claims is that James’s doctrine in *The Will to Believe* is continuous with that in *Pragmatism*.¹⁴ But Russell portrays the lines of continuity in an unattractive light, maintaining that James’s view in both works is that “although there is no evidence in favour of religion, we ought nevertheless to believe it if we find satisfaction in so doing.”¹⁵ This is a crude and unfair account of James’s position in *The Will to Believe*, for he nowhere says what one *ought* to believe, but only what one has a *right* to believe; and he certainly did not hold – there or in *Pragmatism* – that one should believe things for which one has *no* evidence.¹⁶ If Russell’s summary isn’t always a reliable guide to James, it is certainly a reliable indicator of the distinctly bad odor in which pragmatism was held among Wittgenstein’s friends and disciples.¹⁷ And it presages Wittgenstein’s hostility to the pragmatic theory of truth.

Although pragmatism was for Russell mainly an object of criticism and ridicule, the story he tells about it is not entirely negative. He credits pragmatism with improving on Mill's inductive logic by recognizing what we would now call holistic elements in scientific induction: "We cannot say that this or that fact proves this or that law: the whole body of facts proves (or, rather, renders probable) the whole body of laws. . . . Thus the justification of a science is that it fits all the known facts, and that no alternative system of hypotheses is known which fits the facts equally well." Yet Russell objects to this pragmatist view on the ground that "there are truths of fact which are prior to the whole inductive procedure." He admits that

"[s]uch general assumptions as causality, the existence of an external world, etc., cannot be supported by Mill's canons of induction, but require a far more comprehensive treatment of the whole organized body of accepted scientific doctrine. It is in such treatment that the pragmatic method is seen at its best; and among men of science, its apparent success in this direction has doubtless contributed greatly to its acceptance."¹⁸

I shall argue that it is precisely this *pragmatic holism* – which Wittgenstein encountered in Russell's *Philosophical Essays* in 1912 – that sounded uncomfortably close to Wittgenstein's own philosophy in 1951.¹⁹ James's word for this holism was sometimes "pragmatism," and sometimes "humanism."²⁰

Moore was the other major philosophical figure in Wittgenstein's early years at Cambridge. Wittgenstein attended Moore's lectures in 1912 and told Russell "how much he loves Moore, how he likes and dislikes people for the way they think. . . ."²¹ Two years later, he entreated Moore to visit him in Norway, where he dictated the "Notes on Logic" that introduced the central Tractarian distinction between saying and showing. Moore did not think well of pragmatism. His review of James's *Pragmatism* first appeared in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* for 1907–8 (when Moore was thirty-three and James was sixty-five), and was reprinted in Moore's *Philosophical Studies* (1922).²² Moore takes up James's "humanistic" claim that "to an unascertainable extent our truths are man-made products," maintaining that it is "a commonplace that almost all our beliefs, true as well as false, depend, in some way or other upon what has previously been in some human mind." Certainly, Moore points out, we obtain many of our beliefs from other

people. However, James wants to say something that is neither a commonplace nor, according to Moore, true: “I think he certainly means to suggest that we not only make our true beliefs, but also that we *make them true*.”²³ But, of course, as Moore explains in meticulous detail, it is just not true that my *belief* that the sun will rise *causes the sun to rise*.

Moore also considers James’s view that “all our true ideas are useful.”²⁴ On the contrary, he argues,

there seems to be an immense number of true ideas, which occur but once and to one person, and never again either to him or to anyone else. I may, for instance, idly count the number of dots on the back of a card, and arrive at a true idea of their number; and yet, perhaps, I may never think of their number again, nor anybody else ever know it. . . . is it quite certain that all these true ideas are useful? It seems to me perfectly clear, on the contrary, that many of them are not.²⁵

Moore argues that a “long-run” view of truth does not help avoid this problem, for he denies that all true beliefs pay in the long run. Some of them, he maintains, may have no effects at all. Moore also argues that according to James, if it were useful to believe in William James’s existence “this belief would be true, even if he didn’t exist.”²⁶

Moore’s rather condescending attitude to James is summed up in his view that some of what James says is just “silly”:

I hope Professor James would admit all these things to be silly, for if he and other Pragmatists would admit even as much as this, I think a good deal would be gained. But it by no means follows that because a philosopher would admit a view to be silly, when it is definitely put before him, he has not himself been constantly holding and implying that very view.²⁷

James replied to his critics in a series of articles published in the first decade of the century.²⁸ He was aware that pragmatism “is usually described as a characteristically American movement, a sort of bob-tailed scheme of thought, excellently fitted for the man on the street, who naturally hates theory and wants cash returns immediately.”²⁹ But he charged Russell and Moore³⁰ with taking the pragmatists’ terms narrowly, with taking *paying*, for example, as something that we can observe *vis-à-vis* any belief, at any given moment within our experience (Moore thinks it obvious that idly counting the number of dots on a card does not “pay.”). Yet, the holism James embraces, and which Russell discusses, provides the resources used by later pragmatists to

deal with Moore's objections. If, as Quine maintains, our beliefs "face the tribunal of reality . . . not individually but as a corporate body," our belief about the number of dots is part of a web of belief – including, for example, beliefs about what one did on the afternoon one counted those dots. It "pays" as part of this web.³¹

The exception to the uniformly negative attitude toward pragmatism among Wittgenstein's Cambridge colleagues was Frank Ramsey, one of the few British philosophers to study Peirce. Ramsey developed a pragmatist justification of induction, and conceived of logic as a normative discipline concerned with "how we ought to think."³² In 1923, while still an undergraduate studying mathematics and philosophy, Ramsey reviewed the *Tractatus* for *Mind*, and later that year visited Wittgenstein in Austria, where they pored over the English translation of the *Tractatus* line by line. When Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge as a student in 1929, Ramsey became his supervisor. In the Preface to the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein credits him with "always certain and forceful" criticisms of the *Tractatus* (PI, vi). There is no evidence, however, that he and Wittgenstein discussed pragmatism. In any case, Wittgenstein came to have deep reservations about Ramsey as a thinker. "A good objection," he wrote in his journal, "helps one forward, a shallow objection, even if it is valid, is wearisome. Ramsey's objections are of this kind."³³ A year or so after Ramsey's death at the tragically early age of 26, Wittgenstein confided to his diary that Ramsey was a "bourgeois thinker," who was disturbed by "real philosophical reflection" (CV, 17). Ramsey did not seem to Wittgenstein to have advanced the pragmatist cause.

Wittgenstein criticizes what seems to be a pragmatic theory of validity in an unpublished work from the early thirties, entitled *Philosophical Grammar*: "If I want to carve a block of wood into a particular shape any cut that gives it the right shape is a good one. But I don't call an argument a good argument just because it has the consequences I want (Pragmatism)."³⁴ This argument against a theory in some respects like Ramsey's, echoes the criticisms Russell and Moore launched against the pragmatist theory of truth: that for the pragmatist, "true" simply means "having the consequences one wants."

Pragmatism was thus "in the air" throughout Wittgenstein's life, something he is likely to have heard others speak of, and which he brought up from time to time in his writing and conversation – but

never favorably. In his 1946–7 lectures he mentions in passing that Dewey held belief to be “an adjustment of the organism” (L, 90). And in a conversation with O. K. Bouwsma a year or so later – during the time he composed *On Certainty* – he offers an opinion of Dewey that indicates the continuity of his negative attitude toward pragmatism and pragmatist writers. Walking in the gorge at Cornell, Wittgenstein criticizes current philosophy as represented in Paul Schilpp’s *Library of Living Philosophers*:

He had never read any of these – had opened the Moore volume – read about Moore’s boyhood – very nice, but the shoemaker also had a boyhood, very nice. Dewey – was Dewey still living? Yes. Ought not to be. Russell was once very good. Once did some hard work. Cambridge kicked him out when he was good. Invited him back when he was bad.³⁵

Wittgenstein goes on and on about Russell, but although he at least states that Russell *once* was good, he has no kind word for Dewey. Wittgenstein does not show *anywhere* a positive attitude toward pragmatism. The possibility that his own philosophy sounds “something like pragmatism” was not for him a happy one.

There is one more source, however, for Wittgenstein’s acquaintance with pragmatism: a book by a founding pragmatist writer that we know Wittgenstein to have read again and again. This is James’s *Principles of Psychology*, a book that, unlike *Pragmatism*, met with much favor in Britain. It was required reading for the psychology course at Cambridge, and Benjamin Ward’s long article on psychology in the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* makes extensive use of James’s work. Wittgenstein refers to the book in his journals and typescripts, from the early 1930s until the end of his life; and in such works as *Philosophical Grammar*, *The Brown Book*, the two volumes of *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, and the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Although it was published eight years before James identified himself as a pragmatist, *The Principles of Psychology* is in many ways continuous with James’s later works, including *Pragmatism*.³⁶ One way of putting the relationship is to say that in *The Principles*, James sets out the psychology presupposed by pragmatism: of the human subject as a “fighter for ends,” who sculpts experience according to her interests (PP, 277).³⁷ “It is far too little recognized,” James writes,

how entirely the intellect is built up of practical interests. . . . The germinal question concerning things brought for the first time before consciousness is not the theoretic ‘What is that?’ but the practical ‘Who goes there?’ or rather, as Horwicz has admirably put it, ‘What is to be done?’ – *Was fang’ ich an?*’ . . . In all our discussions about the intelligence of lower animals the only test we use is that of their *acting* as if for a purpose” (PP, 941).

Wittgenstein considered as a motto for the *Investigations* a line from Goethe’s *Faust*: “In the beginning was the deed.”³⁸ This line would serve equally well as a motto for some main themes of *The Principles of Psychology*.

The Principles of Psychology is more than a work of psychology, despite James’s repeated declarations that he will avoid philosophical issues. Among the many philosophical pronouncements James makes is a statement that anticipates the holistic humanism developed in *Pragmatism*:

It is conceivable that several rival theories should equally well include the actual order of our sensations in their scheme. . . . *That theory will be most generally believed which, besides offering us objects able to account satisfactorily for our sensible experience, also offers those which are most interesting, those which appeal most urgently to our aesthetic, emotional, and active needs*” (PP, 939–40).³⁹

The idea that several theories might adequately account for our sensible “data,” and that our criteria for acceptance of theories are shaped by who we are as human beings, presages James’s later pluralistic humanism, as it does Putnam’s “many faces of realism.”⁴⁰

In considering the possible relevance of *The Principles* to Wittgenstein’s acquaintance with pragmatism we must also keep in mind that James considered pragmatism to be a type of personality or temperament, a mediator between the “tough minded” and the “tender minded.” The pragmatist finds middle ground between empiricism and idealism; concrete facts and the pull of principles; dogmatism and skepticism; optimism and pessimism (P, 13). This appreciative and mediating temperament is, in many ways, the temperament of William James, and it pervades all his books. As we consider *The Principles* in Chapters 3 through 5, we will consider ways in which it offered Wittgenstein a pragmatist philosophical persona: nonfanatical, concerned to avoid the grip of theory, attuned to the human

interests served by our theorizing, and flexible enough to move on without having every question answered.

2

If Wittgenstein knew enough about pragmatism to use the term “pragmatism” to describe some aspects of his own philosophy in *On Certainty*, what exactly are they? I want to begin with a set of paragraphs dated March 20, 1951, just a day before the single appearance of the word “pragmatism” in Wittgenstein’s book at section 422. These begin as follows:

Our knowledge forms an enormous system. And only within this system has a particular bit the value we give it (OC, 410).

If I say “we *assume* that the earth has existed for many years past” (or something similar), then of course it sounds strange that we should assume such a thing. But in the entire system of our language-games it belongs to the foundations. The assumption, one might say, forms the basis of action, and therefore, naturally, of thought (OC, 411).

These paragraphs exhibit two features that Wittgenstein’s philosophy shares with James’s pragmatism: a sense that not all empirical propositions, or beliefs, play the same role; and a sense of the interrelation of action and thought. Notice Wittgenstein’s complicated description of the role of beliefs like “the earth has existed for many years past.” This is the sort of belief a radical skeptic questions, but one that in our “normal,” nonphilosophical lives we do not question. (It is also one of the beliefs Russell wrote that pragmatists are particularly good at giving an account of.) Such a belief, Wittgenstein asserts, “forms the basis of action, and therefore, of thought.” If the earth just popped into existence a moment ago, why should I expect to find any stationery when I open my desk; and how can I think of myself as having lived in New York years ago if the earth didn’t exist years ago? In such ways the belief is a basis for action and thought.

Moore attempted to prove such beliefs, and claimed to “know” the truth of the propositions they contain. His two papers, “Proof of an External World” and “A Defence of Common Sense,”⁴¹ are under direct attack in *On Certainty* precisely for not recognizing the special

place these propositions have in our system of belief:

Moore's assurance that he knows . . . does not interest us. The propositions, however, which Moore retails as examples of such known truths are indeed interesting. Not because anyone knows their truth, or believes he knows them, but because they all have a *similar* role in the system of our empirical judgments (OC, 137).

We don't, for example arrive at any of them as a result of investigation (OC, 138).

Wittgenstein's description at section 411 of *On Certainty* highlights the role of action, suggesting that action precedes "thought." Yet, action takes place against a background of certain beliefs, which have a particular foundational value within "this system." *On Certainty* works within the framework of the *Philosophical Investigations* view that language takes the form of language games, which are complicated forms of living – including building, praying, telling jokes, reporting, and playing games (PI, 23). Within each practice, certain beliefs stand fast; and some beliefs stand fast for many, some perhaps for all, of our practices. It is not that these beliefs are "a priori true," seen in a flash of insight into the nature of things, or a consequence of some definition we decide to adopt; they are off our routes of inquiry or investigation. Wittgenstein's stress on action in making this point is especially pronounced at section 204 of *On Certainty*: "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i. e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game." "Our acting" forms the background against which our language-games take shape. Our linguistic practices "show" the background against which they appear. But the background shows things on which these linguistic practices depend: "My *life* shows that I know, am certain, etc." (OC, 7). In Wittgenstein's later philosophy, as in this quotation, action and thought are intertwined, with each at times providing the background for the other.

Wittgenstein often speaks of the background as a set of "propositions," and he also speaks of a "world-picture." But equally often he speaks, as mentioned previously, of actions, rather than propositions: the "end" of the justificatory questions is said to be not a proposition but a set of actions, a form of life. This side of Wittgenstein's thinking

corresponds to John Searle's notion of "The Background," which is a set of "nonrepresentational mental capacities," such as "walking, eating, grasping, perceiving, recognizing, and the preintentional stance that takes account of the solidity of things, and the independent existence of objects and other people. . . ."42 For Searle, the existence of the world is not something I hypothesize, but rather something to which I show "commitment . . . whenever I do pretty much anything."⁴³ Just because it is possible to extricate an element of the background and "treat it as a representation," Searle cautions, it does not follow that "when it is functioning, it is functioning as a representation."⁴⁴

With his emphasis on action, practice, and, as we shall see, instinct, Wittgenstein suggests a view like Searle's. Yet he continues to think of the "enormous system" as, at least in part, representational. Much of the work of *On Certainty* lies in an attempt to explain the nature of this system, and the book contains a series of forceful and beautiful metaphors expressing the idea that some propositions are under contention or exploration, while others are outside the domain of inquiry. Those outside the domain of inquiry are, as it were, already tacitly "decided" upon – not by any individual or group of individuals, but by the human culture living within the framework they provide. Wittgenstein speaks of our "frame of reference," versus the facts we discover within the frame (OC, 83); of the route traveled by inquiry versus the places inquiry does not go (OC, 88); of the "inherited background" versus the truths we discover against this background (OC, 94); of convictions lying on an "unused siding" (OC, 210) versus those on the main line; and of the "hinges" of all else that we do.

This fundamental distinction of *On Certainty*, both akin to and distinct from the Jamesean pragmatic holism we shall examine in the following section, appears in the following quotations:

The *truth* of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference (OC, 83).

It may be for example that *all enquiry on our part* is set so as to exempt certain propositions from doubt, if they are ever formulated. They lie apart from the route traveled by enquiry (OC, 88).

But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false (OC, 94).

Does my telephone call to New York strengthen my conviction that the earth exists?

Much seems to be fixed, and it is removed from the traffic. It is so to speak shunted onto an unused siding (OC, 210).

Now it gives our way of looking at things, and our researches, their form. Perhaps it was once disputed. But perhaps, for unthinkable ages, it has belonged to the scaffolding of our thoughts (Every human being has parents.) (OC, 211).

That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn (OC, 341).

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted (OC, 342).

Wittgenstein is talking about propositions isolated by Moore in his responses to skepticism (or, if one follows Searle, preintentional stances “treatable” as propositions), but misunderstood by him as items of “knowledge.” These propositions – such as “The earth has existed for many years past” – constitute the “framework” or “hinge” propositions that are “fixed,” on the side. They are tied up with our actions or practices. They are “*in deed* not doubted.” There is no need to strengthen our confidence in these beliefs; and, more importantly, there is no *point* in doing so, for they are already as strong as beliefs get. This is why a telephone call to New York may strengthen my conviction that my friend really intends to visit, but *not* strengthen my conviction that the earth exists. That conviction is already “certain,” in its position in the framework, on the unused siding.

Wittgenstein’s framework propositions, like Moore’s list of things he knows, are a diverse lot. Some of them are global and impersonal (“The earth has existed for many years past”), while others are stated in the first person, and true of a particular human being (“I have never been in Asia Minor” [OC, 419]). This latter proposition is as sure as anything in Wittgenstein’s framework, but not in that of a resident of Turkey. As with the more global propositions, Wittgenstein finds that the certainty of the proposition arises neither from a priori understanding, nor from investigation, but from its role in one’s life, including its relation to other propositions one believes. Where, Wittgenstein asks, do I get the knowledge that I have never been in Asia Minor? He replies: “I have not worked it out, no one told me; my memory tells me. – So I can’t be wrong about it? Is there a truth here

which I *know*? – I cannot depart from this judgment without toppling all other judgments with it” (OC, 419). All other judgments will topple because none is more certain than this one, and because this one is tied in with others. For example, if it turns out that Wittgenstein has in fact spent many years in Asia Minor despite his firm memory to the contrary, why should he believe – trust himself in believing – that he left his notebook on his desk, or that he is now in England? But of course he has *investigated* none of these matters.

Wittgenstein sounds a note of radical skepticism in the idea of “toppling all other judgments.” Like Moore, he is concerned with the proper response to those, like Descartes, who question whether we really have bodies, or are awake when we think we are, living in a world of things and people. Whereas the proper response to skepticism is a matter of central concern to Wittgenstein,⁴⁵ pragmatists tend to sidestep it – more or less instinctively in James, more self-consciously in Dewey and Peirce.⁴⁶ (For example, Dewey’s notion of experience as a “transaction” *builds in* the idea of self-world interaction that the radical skeptic questions.)⁴⁷ Perhaps the *Weltanschauung* thwarting Wittgenstein is one in which skepticism is not deeply worrying or important.⁴⁸ Experience as viewed by the pragmatists contains “problems,” or as Dewey has taught us to say, “problem situations”; but not the agony of skepticism around which much of traditional philosophy – and Wittgenstein’s philosophy as well – is organized.⁴⁹

To Wittgenstein’s question “So I can’t be wrong about it?” the answer must be complicated. Surely one can imagine circumstances (such as a brain injury and memory loss) that might support the claim that I’m wrong about having never been in Asia Minor. Yet, apart from such abnormal circumstances, the belief’s position seems as secure as any; and if we allow “wrong” to generalize to all my secure beliefs then it’s not clear what “wrong” means any more. Does this amount to answering: “Yes, I can’t be wrong?” Close to it, yet the question and answer are both strange or uncanny. To the second question – “Is there a truth here which I *know*?” Wittgenstein pretty clearly wants to answer “no.” This is because the framework propositions are not on the routes of inquiry where knowledge is achieved.

The argument at section 419 of *On Certainty* is repeated at section 421, the paragraph just before Wittgenstein’s comment that he is saying something that sounds like pragmatism. He shifts the example, from

not having ever been in Asia Minor, to now being in England: “I am in England. – Everything around me tells me so; wherever and however I let my thoughts turn, they confirm this for me at once. – But might I not be shaken if things such as I don’t dream of at present were to happen?” (OC, 421). The paragraph again ends on a skeptical note, raising the possibility of unforeseen happenings that cast doubt on something as obvious and secure as one’s belief about what country one is in. Again, there are cases where such a belief might be on the “route of inquiry” – if one is lost near the border between England and Wales for example – but Wittgenstein’s case is precisely one in which “wherever and however I let my thoughts turn, they confirm this for me at once.” Wittgenstein speaks of confirmation here – as if the thought that he is in England *is* after all on the route of inquiry and could be confirmed. This is perhaps another reason why he says in the next paragraph that what he is saying sounds like pragmatism. It is true that he says his “thoughts,” rather than his senses or experience, confirm that he is in England, but he also writes that “everything around me tells me so” – indicating things such as the carpets, the teacups, his chair, and the familiar trees and buildings he sees outside his window. The thought that he is in England, James would say, squares most smoothly – “with a minimum of jolt” – with his ongoing experience.

3

Wittgenstein stated that he was saying something that sounds like pragmatism, and we have now considered some passages from *On Certainty* that support this claim – passages where he speaks of our inherited “world picture” or the “scaffolding of our thoughts” rooted in our practices or deeds. I want next to consider some parallels in a definitive pragmatist text, William James’s *Pragmatism*.

In an early chapter of that book, entitled “What Pragmatism Means,” James maintains that an individual’s beliefs constitute a system, the older parts of which are joined to new ideas in ways that create minimal disturbance:

The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with

which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously), until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter. . . .

This new idea is then adopted as the true one. . . . The most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of his old order standing. Time and space, cause and effect, nature and history, and one's own biography remain untouched. New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity. . . . [But] individuals will emphasize their points of satisfaction differently. To a certain degree, therefore, everything here is plastic (P, 34–5).

Within the evolving system of our opinions, James holds, most of the “old order” remains standing. Even as we learn new facts and rearrange or revolutionize our theories of things, “we are all extreme conservatives” in regard to certain beliefs. James calls these long and fondly held beliefs those of “common sense,” and devotes an entire chapter of *Pragmatism* to them. These “ancient” commonsense beliefs are the equivalent of Wittgenstein's inherited “picture of the world against which I distinguish between true and false,” a picture that has served human beings for “unthinkable ages.”

James's chapter on “Pragmatism and Common Sense” changes the metaphor but repeats the vision of a tried and true system of knowledge, which grows only at certain points. Our knowledge, he now writes, grows only “*in spots*” (P, 82). It follows that

very ancient modes of thought may have survived through all the later changes in men's opinions. . . . My thesis now is this, that *our fundamental ways of thinking about things are discoveries of exceedingly remote ancestors, which have been able to preserve themselves throughout the experience of all subsequent time*. They form one great stage of equilibrium in the human mind's development, the stage of *common sense*” (P, 83).

Notice that James speaks of these ancient beliefs as “discoveries” and “knowledge,” whereas Wittgenstein criticizes the idea that our world-picture is a discovery – this would be to confuse what lies along with what lies off the route of inquiry. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein and James

agree in seeing certain “opinions” or “modes of thought” as occupying more or less fixed places in the system. Whereas in “What Pragmatism Means” James had written about each *individual’s* stock of opinions, here he writes about “*our* fundamental ways of thinking” and “the human mind’s development,” chiming with the social cast of Wittgenstein’s views.

James names these ancient “ways of thinking,” or “concepts”: “Thing,” “Minds,” “Bodies,” “One Time,” “One Space,” “Causal Influences” (P, 85). There is both a Kantian and a pragmatic flavor to this list: in the idea that time, space, causality, and substances or things are basic, James follows Kant, but in the idea that they are tools for “straightening . . . the tangle of our experience’s immediate flux, . . . useful *denkmittel* for finding our way,” he gives them a pragmatic justification (P, 87–8). Wittgenstein presents the fixed points in the system as a series of propositions; whereas James thinks of them as “categories” and presents them in a list. Yet James’s categories of common sense take propositional form too, for each involves an existential claim – that there is one space and one time, that there are things and minds. James sounds like the metaphysician he usually tries to avoid being when he writes: “‘Things’ do exist, even when we do not see them. Their kinds also exist” (P, 89).⁵⁹

According to James, our ways of thinking have a history: they might have been discovered by “prehistoric geniuses whose names the night of antiquity has covered up; . . . they may have *spread*, until all language rested on them and we are now incapable of thinking naturally in any other terms” (P, 89). James discerns three levels or stages of thought about the world, of which common sense is the oldest and most “*consolidated*.” The others – science and philosophic criticism – are superior for certain spheres of life, but no one of the three is “absolutely more *true* than any other” (P, 92). Anticipating Rorty’s linguistic pragmatism (itself formed through a reading of both James and Wittgenstein, among others) James writes of the three levels: “They are all but ways of talking on our part, to be compared solely from the point of view of their *use*” (P, 93). Although our commonsense categories are “built into the very structure of language,” they are not immune from all doubt. They may still be “only a collection of extraordinarily successful hypotheses,” which, with the advance of science and philosophic thought, may yet be modified (P, 94).

Before turning to some differences between James's and Wittgenstein's views, I want to consider what might seem to be a fundamental difference, but is not. We have seen that for James "everything is plastic," albeit "to a certain degree," and that our commonsense "hypotheses," deeply entrenched in our practice and thought as they are, may still be abandoned. Now Wittgenstein's metaphors of "off the route of inquiry," or "hinges" on which all else depend, seem not to allow for any plasticity whatsoever. A hinge is fixed, and if something is off the route there seems no way for it to move. Remember though, the historical element in Wittgenstein's account. If something is now off the route of inquiry it need not always have been; nor must it continue to be forever. In the paragraphs succeeding section 94 of *On Certainty*, where Wittgenstein discusses the idea of a "Weltbild" or world-picture, he comes to grips with the historical element in his account of necessity by introducing the idea of a river within whose channels our changing beliefs flow:

The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically ("praktisch"), without learning any explicit rules (OC, 95).

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid (OC, 96).

But if someone were to say "So logic too is an empirical science" he would be wrong. Yet this is right: the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing (OC, 98).

Wittgenstein's world-picture, like James's "ancient stock" of beliefs, has a history, even though its details may be lost in the misty past. Rivers are ancient, but they are not eternal; they follow, as they also confine, the flow of their water. The metaphor of the riverbed brings out the respect in which, for Wittgenstein, even the most fundamental level may be "plastic."

Yet Wittgenstein, the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, never abandons his commitment to the idea that his philosophical observations are also logical investigations, and that logic brings a different kind of certainty than most of what we call "knowledge."

This is the first of the differences between Wittgenstein's and James's pragmatism to which I now want to call attention. Wittgenstein's commitment is registered in his reference to "logic" at section 98 of *On Certainty* and in his assertion there that "the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing." This is not just the positivist's claim that "we decide" what is logically true, making it for example into a "rule"; for Wittgenstein is quite clear that "decision" does not come into it, that we don't choose our language games (OC, 317), and that language "did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination" (OC, 475). Wittgenstein uses the passive voice in saying that "a proposition may get treated . . . as a rule," allowing it to remain unstated by whom and when this treatment is brought about. I think Bernard Williams is right in arguing that Wittgenstein is not "thinking at all in terms of actual groups of human beings whose activities we might want to understand and explain," but is rather concerned with "finding our way around inside our own view, feeling our way out to the points at which we begin to lose our hold. . . ."51 The Wittgensteinian "we" is not the contingent "we" of some group or culture, but the "necessary" or "transcendental" we of the human. (Yet Wittgenstein's remarks about logic have a pragmatist sound insofar as they stress its roots in practice. Logic, Wittgenstein suggests in a passage we considered previously, is intertwined with our forms of life, actions, or deeds: "it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted" [OC, 342].)

James has the idea of a system of beliefs, of the tug and resistance of its parts on one another, even the idea that they can "contradict each other." Indeed, it is in *Pragmatism* that he comes closest to recognizing something similar to what Wittgenstein means by logic. Even in *Pragmatism*, though, he writes as if our accommodation of new facts with the least possible disturbance to the system is a matter of setting up a new set of habits, or satisfying desires. The notion of logic is basically foreign to his philosophy. There is nothing in James's writing to match Wittgenstein's idea of an all-pervading logic or grammar, nor his insistence that when one tries to either affirm or deny propositions at the most basic level one produces *nonsense*. What, Wittgenstein asks, would be the point of assuring someone that the earth has existed for more than the last five minutes? I can *utter these words* of course, but what can I do with them, what that is intelligible can I mean by them?⁵² At

the “foundations” there is nothing to be said, and the attempt to assert certain propositions or raise certain doubts is undercut at the start:

“Can you be mistaken about this color’s being called ‘green’ in English?” My answer to this can only be ‘No’. If I were to say ‘Yes, for there’s always the possibility of a delusion,’ that would mean nothing at all (OC, 624).

A doubt without an end is not even a doubt (OC, 625).

The answer can only be “no” because there is “no possibility” of mistake. But isn’t there really a possibility of mistake? It is this skeptical question that Wittgenstein tries to (portray as) undercut. This doubt “would mean nothing at all”; we think it is a real doubt but it is “not even a doubt.” It can no more be asserted than it can be doubted or denied.

Wittgenstein offers an historicized picture in which certain doubts and certain statements are nevertheless not possible. Logic, he suggests, shows, but we cannot assert, certain propositions, which are grounded in human action: “Am I not getting closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described? You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it” (OC, 501). Whatever Wittgenstein’s notion of logic comes to, and however we square it with the idea of historical development, it is clear that it strikes a note never sounded by James. Here as elsewhere in his later philosophy, Wittgenstein struggles with the problem of how to register both the historical and the necessary in his account of logic or grammar.⁵³ This problem simply does not exist for James.

A pragmatist for whom this problem does exist is Hilary Putnam, who signals his concern with conflicting intuitions about necessity in the title of his book *Reason, Truth and History*. Putnam agrees with Wittgenstein and James that we operate from within a set of practices or beliefs: “One can interpret traditions variously, but one cannot apply a word at all if one places oneself entirely outside of the tradition to which it belongs.”⁵⁴ Yet Putnam also wants to preserve a robust concept of rationality that transcends any particular tradition: “The very fact that we speak of our different conceptions as different conceptions of *rationality* posits a *Grenzbegriff*, a limit-concept of the ideal truth.”⁵⁵ Perhaps Wittgenstein has a picture of pragmatists as empiricists all the way down, with no rational constraints on our picture of the world – a picture that fits James, but not Putnam.⁵⁶

James does offer an account of logic in the final chapter of *The Principles of Psychology*, but it is a psychological and materialistic account. He criticizes those such as Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill who hold that logic merely reflects the course of our experience. Logic, James argues, has an unalterability and solidity that no mere experience could give it. This is, however, explained by a “native structure” of the mind that is grounded in “the inner forces which have made the brain grow” (PP, 1268). As Ellen Kappy Suckiel puts it, James finds our basic categories “embodied in the structure of our brains.”⁵⁷ Logic for James is just “the way we think” – a way of understanding it that, from Wittgenstein’s perspective, is a fatal first step.

If Wittgenstein’s commitment to logic sets him apart from James, then James’s commitment to science (to be more fully discussed in Chapter 3) sets him apart from Wittgenstein. This then is the second difference between them to which I want to draw attention. Now for our purposes we need to remember that James was a physiologist and psychologist before turning to philosophy, and that he often thought of his projects as a blend of science and philosophy – for example, in his anticipation in *Varieties of Religious Experience* of a “Science of Religions,” that would resolve the question of divinity in the universe (VRE, 389). On the other hand, Wittgenstein, both early and late, sees science as completely separate from philosophy. “Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences,” he writes in the *Tractatus*: “The word ‘philosophy’ must mean something whose place is above or below the natural sciences, not beside them (TLP, 4.111).⁵⁸ And in the *Investigations* he affirms: “It was true to say that our considerations could not be scientific ones. . . . we may not advance any kind of theory. . . . We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place” (PI, 109). James shares with the logical positivists of Wittgenstein’s day the idea that philosophy could – and should – become more scientific. This is, I think, part of the *Weltanschauung* to which Wittgenstein felt opposed.

For James, the justification for our beliefs is empirical, all the way down, in any context:

Truth lives, in fact, for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs ‘pass’, so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them. But this all points to direct face-to-face